



# Bereavement

is everyone's  
business





## **The Right Reverend and Right Honourable Dame Sarah Mullally DBE, the Bishop of London CB**

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### **Foreword**

**Bereavement happens to everyone at some point in their lives.** The UK Commission on Bereavement was set up to find out how we could improve support for bereaved people.

**The Commission was particularly interested in hearing from bereaved children and young people,** to really understand what is important to them. The Commission was also interested to see the results from our project with Votes for Schools, where we asked children and young people about their thoughts on learning about death and bereavement. We were delighted with the responses we received – both from the surveys and the Votes for Schools vote. Thank you to everyone who took part.

**The Commission found out that clear and open communication** - talking about and acknowledging a bereavement - was important for bereaved children and young people, so they felt less alone. The Commission also heard that supporting bereaved children and young people while they were at school was really important. It was reassuring to hear through the Votes for Schools vote that younger students want to hear about how to cope with loss and bereavement, offering a foundation to build on across their lifetime.

**The Commission wants to make sure that all bereaved children and young people are supported** at school and that we learn about death and bereavement, with different lessons for different ages. Some older students felt that a school setting may not be the best place to have those conversations, so we need to find out how to support both students and school staff around this topic.

**The Commission also heard that getting support from specific services** designed to help bereaved children and young people was really helpful. We are asking for more funding for this type of support, so more bereaved children and young people can get the help they need.

**The Commission has also made some other recommendations,** designed to improve the experiences of bereaved adults – these include help with money and housing after a bereavement, and making sure it is easier to deal with paperwork and other tasks when someone has died. We hope that if these are put in place, then all bereaved children and young people will also benefit.

**In the meantime, please do look after yourself and each other.** If you are concerned about one of your friends or classmates, take the time to ask them how they are and speak to a teacher or other trusted adult.

Thank you again to those who engaged with us on this topic and sharing your experiences and voices with us.




# New findings on experiences of bereavement from the UK Commission on Bereavement

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- I am supported by my family, my friends and the communities around me
- I am sensitively supported by my school, college or workplace during my bereavement
- I am well supported before and during the death, and feel confident that the person who died received appropriate and compassionate care
- I feel secure in my home and have the right financial support
- I can easily find and access the right bereavement support for my circumstances.

The UK Commission on Bereavement was set up in 2021. The Commission was concerned about what it is like to be bereaved in the United Kingdom – how people deal with the death of a loved one. The Commission wanted to find out what it was like to be bereaved as a child or young person. The Commission listened to bereaved children, young people, their parents and childhood bereavement services from across the UK. The responses have helped the Commission understand what is important to bereaved children and young people right now. You can find out more about the Commission's work [here](#).



“It’s hard to see my mum so sad all the time even when she’s trying to be happy I can see the sadness as I feel it too.

5-12 YEAR OLD”



# What being bereaved feels like

Many bereaved children and young people who responded explained that they felt overwhelmed, sad and confused. Some said they were not sure they were grieving in the 'right' way. Some children and young people felt tired or had headaches.

Bereaved children and young people talked about people expecting that they would 'get over' their grief after a period of time has passed. Across all age groups, they stated that they wanted people to understand they might need ongoing support around a bereavement, for as long as the support was needed.

**"You will never get over it you will just learn to live with it."**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15

**"It would be nice for them to still support me even if it was more than a year ago, grief is not a linear process and it can still be very hard!"**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 16-17

## Feeling lonely

Many bereaved children and young people felt very isolated or alone – they felt different from their peers. Some children and young people reported that their friends would not play with them, or would talk about them behind their backs. This didn't help their feelings of sadness and loneliness.

**"I felt like I was the only one who's daddy had died."**

CHILD AGED 5-12

**"Everyone sees it as me just misbehaving maybe if teachers and any other adults involved were trained to see the signs I wouldn't of been left for the last 18 months with no support."**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15

## Lots of change and loss

Bereaved children and young people can face change in their daily lives after a death has happened. Changes include moving house, moving schools or having new arrangements put in place, for example, being looked after by different people or family members.

## Being a bereaved child or young person at school

Most children and young people spend most of their time at school, so the Commission was very interested in hearing about the experiences of being bereaved while learning.

Some bereaved children and young people said that that no-one at school had talked to them about their bereavement or the impact it was having on them. They felt isolated, with no-one to talk to.

**"I knew my teachers all knew, but no-one spoke to me about the fact they knew, so it felt like an unspoken secret."**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15





Bereaved children and young people also found it difficult when they felt pressure to be at school or to keep up with school work. Some bereaved children struggled with their behaviour at school, but felt the school didn't understand.

**“My school making me go to school when I just wanted to be with my mummy on my daddy’s birthday”**

CHILD AGED 5-12

**“My school telling mummy I was the naughty kid because I couldn’t sit still and concentrate.”**

CHILD AGED 5-12

Communication is key, particularly at secondary school where bereaved pupils see more teachers and peers across the school day. Information can be lost, meaning that the bereaved child or young person might need to tell their story several times to different people.

**“My daughter’s school did not tell people her Dad had died so as a 9 year old she was asked daily if her Dad was better. He had been dead a week before I found this out.”**

PARENT

However, if they were supported in the right way, bereaved children and young people felt that going to school was a good decision. Support included having flexible plans put in place, with parents and teachers talking openly about how things were and what to do to support the child and any siblings.

**“She had special permission to leave the classroom if she needed to.”**

PARENT OF CHILD AGED 5-12

**“At school, my teachers gave me extra time to do work so I was less stressed.”**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15

## The pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that the support bereaved children and young people had was interrupted. It was harder to get together with friends and family to support one another.

**“Bereaved children and families have also struggled with increased isolation, prolonging the most difficult phases of grief.”**

CHILDREN’S BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT ORGANISATION

Thirty-one per cent of young people said that school or college closures during lockdowns made it harder for them.

**“School closures meant many children were denied an important source of routine, stability and support at a time when they needed it most.”**

CHILDREN’S BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT ORGANISATION

By the time they returned to school, their bereavement might not be seen as ‘recent’ and was therefore less likely to result in support.



# What helped?

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Many bereaved children and young people told the Commission that they really valued the support from family and friends, particularly when they were offered the chance to do normal activities. These ranged from going to the park, going out, listening and talking (sometimes about the person who died, sometimes not).

## Bereaved children and young people told the Commission what worked for them:

- **Check in on us over time**
- **Listen, support and ‘be there’ for us**
- **Advocate for us**
- **Help us to understand we are not alone**
- **And do normal and relaxing things with us.**

They wanted opportunities to talk, but not to be pressured to do so. Bereaved children and young people also valued support from those close to them who understood what was happening and were ready to help as and when needed by being there, listening without judgement and offering ongoing support.

**“My friends playing with me at school.”**

CHILD AGED 5-12

**“And also what helped me was to go to my grandparents house to sleep over to get a break from reality of my life with my dad dying.”**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15

**“I did activities like cooking and drawing to help stay busy.”**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15

# Structured support

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When children and young people receive good support from childhood bereavement services, it matters. Many bereaved children and young people who responded to our survey talked about a key person or an organisation who helped them.

These children and young people valued feeling understood, being able to talk, getting help managing their thoughts and feelings and remembering the person who had died, and building their confidence.

Many bereaved children and young people liked meeting other children and young people in similar situations.

Not everyone got help like this, and some young people and parents talked about their struggle to find the right support to help them to cope with the feelings of bereavement and feel more confident about how to manage in the future.





# Eight principles for change

**1**

**I am supported by my family, my friends and the communities around me**

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**2**

**I am sensitively supported by my school, college or workplace during my bereavement**

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**3**

**I am well supported during the death, and feel confident that the person who died received appropriate and compassionate care**

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**4**

**The things I must do after a death are simple and straightforward**

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**5**

**I am compassionately and helpfully supported by those whose job brings them into contact with me through all stages of my bereavement**

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**6**

**I have access to an affordable and meaningful funeral**

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**7**

**I feel secure in my home and have the right financial support**

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**8**

**I can easily find and access the right emotional bereavement support for my circumstance**



# What next?

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The Commission believes that **grief education** - talking about death, dying and bereavement - would help all children and young people to understand what happens when someone is bereaved, to support others going through a bereavement and to support themselves if it happens to them. The Commission thinks that these conversations could happen in school – with different lessons for different ages and support for teachers and other school staff.

**“[This is] also about the next generation of young people who are going to support their peers, their family members [and] others...”**

ORAL EVIDENCE SESSION

The Commission also thinks that all schools should have the right support in place for those children and young people who may be bereaved. This includes clear statements of support and an approach that includes meeting with the family regularly so everyone knows what is happening and how to help.

**Meet the child where they are at, as long as everyone is safe, then however they express (or don't express) emotionally is ok.”**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15

**“Give them a feeling of safety.”**

YOUNG PERSON AGED 13-15

The Commission also thinks that there should be **more funding for bereavement support services** so that more children and young people can get the structured support that many have found helpful.

## Working with Votes for Schools

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The UK Commission also worked with Votes for Schools to find out what children and young people thought about loss and bereavement and if this subject should be taught at school or college. Over 31,000 children and young people took part in the vote.

Primary school children considered ‘Is loss too hard to talk about?’ and ‘Should all children learn about coping with loss and bereavement at school?’

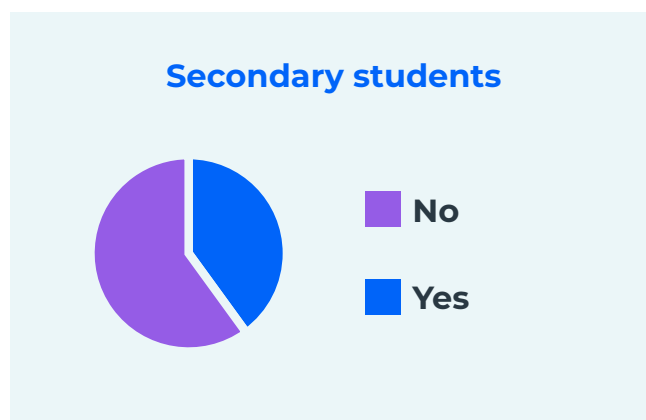
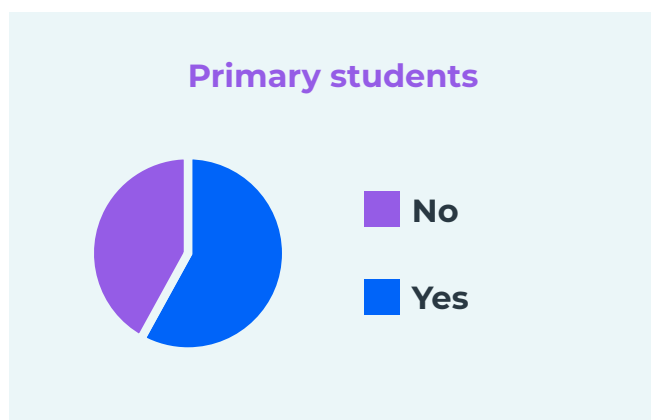
Secondary and college students considered ‘Should learning about coping with loss and bereavement be included on the curriculum?’

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Fifty-eight per cent of primary school pupils, 38% of secondary school pupils and 65% of college students voted to have lessons on how to cope with loss and bereavement in school.



Primary, secondary and college students who voted 'yes' felt that this topic was important and needed to be taught. They felt that everyone will be affected by bereavement at some point in their lives. Students who voted against this idea felt the topic was too sensitive to be discussed in school.

**"We think yes because everyone is going to experience loss at some point."**

PRIMARY SCHOOL RESPONSE

**"I think I will deal with bereavement when I have to but it would be good to have a range of strategies to choose from."**

SECONDARY SCHOOL RESPONSE

**"It was really good this topic because if you know how someone feels, you can help them."**

PRIMARY SCHOOL RESPONSE

**"Everyone deals with loss so it is important that we know how to healthily cope with it without jeopardising our mental health in the long term."**

SECONDARY SCHOOL RESPONSE

